

Est.
1841

YORK
ST JOHN
UNIVERSITY

Richter, Anna and Fitzpatrick, Su (2017) Situated responses to the post-political city: An introduction. *Area*, 50 (1). pp. 3-6.

Downloaded from: <http://ray.yorks.j.ac.uk/id/eprint/2897/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12406>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form.

Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorks.j.ac.uk

Susan Fitzpatrick and Anna Richter

Introduction to the Special Interest Section 'Situated responses to the post-political city'

The rationale for this special section proposal originates from our session at the Interpretive Policy Analysis Annual Conference in 2013: '*Participation – from political demand to festivalised offer*'. There we brought together empirical case studies of how contemporary urban policy imagines 'community', and in so doing, establishes or adds to existing grounds for conflict, discord, cultural marginalisation amongst the groups of interest implicated in contemporary policy making. It seems that with the ever more complex instituting of aggressive neoliberal and neoconservative renewal policies comes an intensified effort to use and instrumentalise the language of consensus and civic unity. The post-political debate framed our discussion, and it is from this perspective that we are proposing a fuller consideration of both policy driven processes and more autonomous spaces in which local resident communities can articulate and enact political perspectives which may not fit within the remit of narrow and consumption-oriented policy objectives, such as the privatisation of public housing, for instance. One dimension of the papers brought together here explore how these forces are embedded within a wider environment of what has been called the 'properly political' (Rancière 2001, Žižek 1999; Swyngedouw 2007; 2009). A second is to allow a fuller consideration of the productive spaces wherein political subjectivities are formed and re-formed. Such spaces undoubtedly require further analysis than is afforded in these short pieces, particularly around the divisions and conflicts circulating within these spaces. However, to not acknowledge these generative spaces is to concede too much ground to the 'strong' post political narrative that an entirely managed public sphere, lacking in any dissenting encounters is an extant reality.

This special section reflects on the categorisations imposed on communities and groups of interest, which form the rationale and often legitimation for further policy intervention in social space. Rather than treat the policy intervention as social fact, communities and groups of interest are in a process of confronting and negotiating urban renewal policy in their neighbourhoods, and we make a case for recognising an intensification of political articulation, position-taking and action during this process.

The three accounts unfold at the local scale, and – more by chance than by design – focus on the city of Glasgow where all three authors participated as activist researchers in a number of spaces which sought to re-articulate the terms on which local residents exist as political subjects. In reflecting on these processes, the papers introduce a new level of nuance and specificity to the broadly stated claims made by those who construct the post-political city as extant reality. We thus take Latour (2004) by his word when we question an alleged 'matter of fact' – a post-political reality – and turn to 'matters of concern' – by re-politicising the debate as much as the relationships, places and discourses that concern us.

Following Dikec (2012: 669) in his insistence on focusing ‘on the job’ of post-political discourse, our intention in this special section is to consider the grounds on which the post-political discourse has emerged and to initiate a more meta-level debate as to how this discourse (and practice of theorising) has influenced urban studies. The papers assembled here respond to the argument that we currently experience a post-political consensus and that democracy has been annulled in the process (Swyngedouw, 2007; 2010). The papers make reference to the process which perhaps gave the post-political debate its initial urgency: urbanisation in its current form of ‘revitalisation’, ‘regeneration’ and ‘festivalisation’ entailed the re-scaling and the intensification of market led orthodoxy in local state power. The steady stream of growth coalition-led, festivalised marketing vehicles which typified Glasgow’s approach to the deindustrialisation of the city region’s economic base from the early 1980’s has been subjected to important critical accounts in the past, including the Workers City Collective’s response to the city hosting the European Capital of Culture in 1990 (1988; 1990). Our current focus is that as the city’s political struggles, cultural history, housing infrastructure and its public spaces have been redefined in discursive and material terms by local state actors, discourses of civic unity, consensus, and indeed festive gaiety persist (Fitzpatrick 2013; Richter 2010; Gotham 2002; 2005; Hannigan 1998). We see evidence here of a double movement (Polanyi 1944) in which the construction of seemingly consensual publics is such a marked characteristic across the different accounts, and how this appears to have opened up new critical spaces of debate and action within various communities of interest. We therefore openly question the post-political as a condition, or a process, which apparently unfolds unimpeded. We aim to highlight blind spots of the post political debate by focusing on the actually existing spaces of political articulation and position-taking that the case studies address. We fear that ‘post-political’ runs the risk of becoming a citational practice, that through repetition of the term a narrowing of political articulation and action *within the debate* starts to occur. The process noun de-politicization might more usefully capture the inherently political nature of attempts made to re-frame political articulation and action as ‘invited spaces of citizenship’ (Cornwall 2002; Miraftab 2004). Understood as a process of which traces are certainly observable, de-politicization begs for its argumentative counterpart, re-politicization, of which we equally find evidence in the papers.

This special section seeks to explore the tensions arising from the post-political debate. While we acknowledge that the construction of consensus within contemporary urban policy can be usefully theorised using the post-political debate, we also recognise that suggestions of urban ‘regeneration’ are manifest of an inherently political process that simultaneously raises questions regarding the post-political debate’s practical implications.

The special section seeks to challenge elements of the post-political debate through the use of situated local responses to a range of urban renewal strategies unfolding in Glasgow. This diverges from those commentators (Mouffe, Swyngedouw, Zizek) who have tended to address their argument to public, institutional actors (Zizek 1999; Mouffe 2005;

Swyngedouw 2007), whereas there are other places and spaces in which politics is a normalised part of everyday life. For Crossan these places are the domestic sphere and other spaces which have learned from the politics, rhythms and ethics of domestic life. One such space, the Glasgow Social Centre (GSC), provides the focus of the remainder of the paper. Crossan re-asserts the potential of collective action in his consideration of the term 'consensus' by describing how it is understood and enacted in the GSC's activities as compared to the "invited" spaces (Cornwall 2002) of 'democratic' governance. He argues that within the GSC's public pedagogy, consensus decision-making is best understood as a collapsing of distance between the *means* and the *end* of political practice. Here individuals learn how to speak and listen, learn about one another's views and learn where there is synergy between those views and *where there is not*.

Similarly, Fitzpatrick attempts to define an alternative understanding of collective political articulation to that put forward by post-political narratives. Her focus is how the 'political' is defined according to different logics, by different interest groups in the context of Glasgow hosting the 2014 Commonwealth Games. Iterations of the 'political' from policy documents; academic papers and during public meetings about the preparations for the Games are considered. Accounts of the emergence of the political subject are ill-served by a scenario in which one definition of urbanisation and its politics is encountered, negotiated, then resisted. Rather it becomes a matter of recognising that particular ways of being as a political subject are not recognised by what Rancière terms the 'police order', but a continual assertion of one's being as a political subject in the everyday continue to unfold in generative and productive ways.

Gray, in his discussion of post-politics, soft austerity urbanism and real abstraction in Glasgow North, equally takes issue with the post-political thesis, if in a slightly different fashion. Whereas Crossan stresses the importance of consensus politics in the context of the GSC and Fitzpatrick outlines the unfolding of political subjectivity in the everyday, Gray in contrast critiques consensus as part of the neoliberal, post-political policy-making machine. He thus warns that focusing on internal community group politics can result in underestimating objective policy constraints; in other words, what works in terms of consensus-policy making and is affirmatively applied in group contexts with its progressive potential, can lead to disavowing broader, systemic concerns.

The three pieces illuminate some of the contestations of the post-political thesis by offering alternative perspectives on political practice and discourse in Glasgow. The articles unfold insights into an urban context that due to its historical and socio-political as well as economic make-up offers a particularly interesting place to revisit, challenge and push the post-political thesis. Clearly, the post-political narrative has its attraction in the sense that it invites a rethinking of the work of politics in the light of ongoing radical changes from neoliberalisation to (soft and hard) austerity urbanism. If McCarthy (2013) invokes the double danger of historicising and romanticising the political by assigning it to a realm no

longer political itself, the post-political can yet serve as an analytical frame with which to trace and unpick a process of depoliticisation or 'arena shifting' (Beveridge 2012). The universalising tendency of the post-political thesis is ruptured in the light of the cases presented in the papers that insist on actually existing alternatives.

References

Beveridge R 2012 Consultants, Depoliticization and Arena-shifting in the Policy Process: Privatizing Water in Berlin *Policy Sciences* 45 47-68

Cornwall A 2002 Locating Citizen Participation *IDS Bulletin* 33 49-58

Dikec M 2012 Space as a mode of political thinking. *Geoforum* 43 669-676

Fitzpatrick S 2013 'Capital of Culture, Creative Communities, and everyone else: Towards a dialogic understanding of creativity'. In *Cultural Economies in Post-Industrial Cities: Manufacturing a (different) Scene*. Breitbart, M. (ed). Ashgate, London. 209 – 234

Gotham K F 2002 Marketing Mardi Gras: Commodification, Spectacle and the Political Economy of Tourism in New Orleans *Urban Studies* 39 1735-1756

Gotham K F 2005 Theorizing urban spectacles. Festivals, tourism and the transformation of urban space *CITY* 9 225-246

Hannigan J 1998 *Fantasy City. Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis* New York

Latour B 2004 Why has critique run out of steam? From matters of fact to matters of concern. *Critical Inquiry* 30 225-248

McCarthy J 2013 We Have Never been Post-political *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 24 19-25

MirafTAB F 2004 Invited and Invented Spaces of Participation: Neoliberal Citizenship and Feminists' Expanded Notion of Politics *Wagadu* 1 1-7

Mouffe C 2005 *On the Political* Routledge, London

Polanyi K 1944 *The Great Transformation* Beacon Press, Boston

Rancière J 2001 Ten theses on politics *Theory and Event* 5 3

Richter A 2010 Exploiting 'an army of friendly faces'. Volunteering and social policy implications. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events* 2 184-88

Swyngedouw E 2007 Impossible/undesirable sustainability and the post-political condition in
Krueger R and Gibbs D eds *The sustainable development paradox* Guilford Press, New York NY 13-40

Swyngedouw E 2009 The antinomies of the postpolitical city: in search of a democratic politics of environmental production *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33 601-20

Workers City 1988 *Workers City: The Real Glasgow Stands Up*. Clydeside Press

Zizek S 1999 *The ticklish subject: the absent centre of political ontology* Verso, London